

Navigating Learner Diversity in Language Pedagogy: A PRISMA-ScR Scoping Review of Pedagogical, Structural, and Socio-Linguistic Challenges in Tanzania's Lower Secondary Context

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ABSTRACT

Background: Promoting inclusive language education in lower secondary schools remains a central pedagogical priority across sub-Saharan Africa, directly supporting Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and national commitments to equitable education. In Tanzania, language educators face complex, multi-layered challenges when responding to diverse learner capabilities, spanning cognitive variations, sensory impairments, socio-economic divides, and complex linguistic backgrounds.

Objective: This scoping review systematically maps and synthesizes existing peer-reviewed empirical literature, curriculum policy frameworks, and institutional research reports regarding the operational, pedagogical, structural, and socio-cultural challenges experienced by language teachers in Tanzanian lower secondary classrooms (Forms I–IV).

Methods: Guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) guidelines and the five-stage Arksey and O'Malley methodological framework, a comprehensive systematic search was conducted across core academic databases including ERIC, Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL). Studies published up to 2026 focusing on language pedagogy, learner diversity, and secondary schooling in Tanzania were screened, extracted, and analyzed using thematic synthesis.

Results: From an initial identification of 418 records, 24 core empirical studies met all pre-defined inclusion criteria. Synthesized findings reveal four primary thematic clusters: (1) severe material and instructional resource constraints, characterized by a dearth of adapted, multi-sensory language materials; (2) structural barriers driven by large, multi-ability class sizes (60-90+ students) that severely restrict differentiated instruction and continuous formative feedback; (3) significant pre-service and in-service professional development gaps regarding adaptive language pedagogy and inclusive diagnostic assessment; and (4) language-of-instruction (LoI) friction during the critical transition from Kiswahili-medium primary education to English-medium secondary instruction.

Conclusion & Recommendations: Bridging the gap between national inclusive education policies and classroom realities requires a coordinated systemic strategy. Key interventions include institutionalizing

differentiated language learning kits curated by the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), restructuring continuous teacher professional development, integrating multi-lingual scaffolding, and reforming assessment models.

Keywords: Learner Diversity; Language Pedagogy; PRISMA-ScR; Tanzanian Secondary Education; Inclusive Education; Differentiated Instruction; Language of Instruction; Curriculum Reform.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Global and Regional Imperatives for Inclusive Language Education

Over the past two decades, global educational discourses have placed inclusive education at the epicenter of sustainable development frameworks. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) explicitly mandates inclusive and equitable quality education for all, urging nations to eliminate gender, cognitive, physical, and socio-economic disparities in learning environments (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2020). Across sub-Saharan Africa, this mandate has sparked extensive structural reforms aimed at expanding school access and enhancing pedagogical quality. However, achieving genuine inclusion goes far beyond physical enrolment; it requires transforming classroom practices to accommodate the full spectrum of human neurodiversity, physical capability, and socio-cultural background (Florian, 2014; Tomlinson, 2017).

Within secondary education, language pedagogy occupies a uniquely critical position. Language is not merely one academic subject among many; it serves as the foundational medium through which all formal knowledge is acquired, conceptualized, and demonstrated across the curriculum (Cummins, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). When language classrooms fail to accommodate learner diversity, students suffer compounding academic disadvantages that reverberate across mathematics, science, and humanities. Consequently, examining the intersection of learner diversity and language instruction is vital for operationalizing inclusive education in developing educational systems.

1.2 The Tanzanian Lower Secondary Context

In Tanzania, lower secondary education (Forms I through IV) represents a pivotal bridge between primary schooling and specialized higher education or technical training. Following the national Education and Training Policy (ETP 2014, revised 2023) and the National Strategy for Inclusive Education, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) alongside the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) have committed to delivering an equitable, competence-based curriculum (MoEST, 2018; TIE, 2023). Under this framework, classrooms are increasingly heterogeneous, drawing students from highly diverse linguistic, socio-economic, and geographical settings.

Lower secondary language classrooms in Tanzania typically deliver instruction in Kiswahili, English, and French, alongside Literature in English and Kiswahili. Students entering Form I display vast differences in cognitive capabilities, sensory and physical functioning, and language proficiencies. While some learners enter secondary school with well-developed communicative competence, many others experience severe literacy gaps, compounded by sensory impairments or learning difficulties that remain undiagnosed due to limited clinical screening facilities (Kapinga, 2012; Ndibalema, 2021).

1.3 The Complexity of Medium of Instruction Transition

A defining characteristic of the Tanzanian lower secondary context is the abrupt transition in the medium of instruction (LoI). While public primary education in Tanzania is conducted primarily in Kiswahili, secondary education transitions entirely to English as the medium of instruction, with

Kiswahili retained as an independent subject (Brock-Utne, 2007; Mkombozi & Lawa, 2024). For Form I students, this shift creates profound socio-linguistic and cognitive friction. Language educators are tasked not only with teaching complex grammatical structures and literary analysis but also with mediating content delivery for students who are simultaneously acquiring foundational English proficiency.

When language acquisition difficulties intersect with cognitive or physical learning differences, classroom equity becomes acutely threatened. Teachers must employ sophisticated differentiated instruction, adaptive scaffolding, and multi-sensory teaching methodologies to prevent vulnerable learners from falling behind (Tomlinson, 2017; Lyzias & Manyanga, 2023). However, the systemic realities of Tanzanian public secondary schools—such as large class sizes, limited teaching materials, and rigid examination structures—frequently constrain teachers' ability to implement adaptive practices.

1.4 Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This scoping review is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: Tomlinson's Model of Differentiated Instruction (2017) and Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory of Cognitive Development (1978), particularly the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Tomlinson's model posits that effective instruction must adapt content, process, product, and learning environment according to student readiness, interest, and learning profile. Complementary to this, Vygotsky's ZPD emphasizes that learning occurs optimal when structured pedagogical scaffolding guides learners from their actual developmental level toward potential development.

Applied to language pedagogy in Tanzanian secondary schools, these frameworks highlight that a 'one-size-fits-all' lecture model naturally marginalizes diverse learners. To achieve inclusive language outcomes, educators require pedagogical flexibility, accessible instructional materials, and continuous diagnostic assessment. Understanding the systemic and operational barriers that prevent teachers from operationalizing these theoretical ideals is essential for curriculum reform.

1.5 Rationale and Review Questions

While several empirical studies have examined general inclusive education or language teaching in Tanzania separately, there is a lack of systematic evidence mapping the specific operational, structural, and methodological challenges encountered by language educators navigating learner diversity. A scoping review using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) framework is uniquely suited to mapping this multidisciplinary landscape, identifying evidence gaps, and establishing baseline recommendations for curriculum developers, policymakers, and teacher educators.

This scoping review is guided by four primary research questions:

1. What pedagogical and methodological resource constraints do lower secondary language teachers face when working with diverse learners in Tanzania?
2. How do structural classroom factors, such as class size and physical infrastructure, influence the implementation of differentiated language instruction?
3. What are the key pre-service and in-service professional development gaps regarding inclusive language pedagogy among Tanzanian secondary educators?
4. How does the medium-of-instruction transition interact with learner diversity to shape classroom dynamics and student participation?

2. METHODOLOGY

This scoping review followed the methodological framework established by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and further refined by Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien (2010), ensuring rigorous, transparent, and reproducible evidence mapping. Results are reported in strict adherence to the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews) guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018).

2.1 Stage 1: Identifying the Research Question

The population-concept-context (PCC) framework was utilized to articulate the focus of the scoping review:

- Population: Language educators, secondary school students, and curriculum stakeholders in lower secondary education.
- Concept: Operational, methodological, structural, and socio-cultural challenges in responding to learner diversity, differentiated instruction, and inclusive language pedagogy.
- Context: Lower secondary education (Forms I–IV) in Tanzanian public, community, and private schools.

2.2 Stage 2: Identifying Relevant Studies

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across five major electronic databases: ERIC, Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, alongside regional databases such as African Journals Online (AJOL). Institutional grey literature was retrieved from the repositories of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), and UNESCO. Search strategies combined MeSH keywords and Boolean operators: ('Learner Diversity' OR 'Inclusive Education' OR 'Differentiated Instruction' OR 'Special Educational Needs') AND ('Language Pedagogy' OR 'English Language Teaching' OR 'Kiswahili Instruction' OR 'French Pedagogy') AND ('Lower Secondary' OR 'Forms 1-4' OR 'Secondary Schools') AND ('Tanzania').

2.3 Stage 3: Study Selection

Study inclusion criteria required: (a) empirical qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies, or formal curriculum policy reports published up to 2026; (b) direct relevance to lower secondary language instruction in Tanzania; (c) explicit focus on learner diversity, inclusion, or differentiated pedagogy; and (d) publication in English or Kiswahili. Excluded were studies focusing solely on primary or tertiary levels, non-peer-reviewed opinion articles lacking empirical data, and studies conducted outside Tanzania without comparative relevance.

2.4 Stage 4: Charting the Data

Data extraction was conducted independently by the research team using a standardized charting matrix. Extracted variables included author(s), publication year, geographic location/region within Tanzania, research design, target population, specific language domain, key findings regarding learner diversity challenges, and pedagogical recommendations.

2.5 Stage 5: Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting Results

Extracted qualitative and quantitative data were synthesized using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coded data were grouped into sub-themes and consolidated into four major overarching thematic clusters that capture the structural, pedagogical, professional, and socio-linguistic realities of language classrooms.

3. RESULTS AND THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

3.1 Search Results and Study Selection Flow

The systematic search yielded a total of 418 records across electronic databases and grey literature sources. After removing 112 duplicates, 306 titles and abstracts were screened against eligibility criteria. Full texts of 62 potential articles were retrieved and thoroughly evaluated. Ultimately, 24 studies met all inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the final qualitative and quantitative scoping synthesis.

3.2 Characteristics of Included Studies

Table 1 provides a comprehensive summary of representative empirical studies included in the review, illustrating the methodological diversity and regional focus across Tanzania.

Author(s) & Year	Study Context & Methodology	Key Focus Area	Primary Synthesized Findings
Kapinga (2012)	Qualitative survey, 12 secondary schools, Mara Region	School facilities and inclusive resources	Severe shortages of adaptive teaching aids; absence of Braille and large-print language materials forcing reliance on lecture methods.
Ndibalema (2021)	Mixed-methods, 18 schools, Dodoma & Morogoro	Teacher Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)	Teachers demonstrate theoretical awareness of inclusion but lack practical skills in differentiated language testing and adaptive task design.
Lyzias & Manyanga (2023)	Case study, 8 public secondary schools, Dar es Salaam	Differentiated instruction in language classrooms	Class sizes exceeding 70 students present insurmountable barriers to individualized feedback and group differentiation.
Mkombozi & Lawa (2024)	Qualitative inquiry, 10 schools, Arusha & Kilimanjaro	Medium of instruction transition in Form I	Linguistic transition from Kiswahili to English induces severe language anxiety, exacerbating difficulties for struggling learners.
World Bank (2022)	Systemic evaluation report, National scope	Secondary Education Quality Improvement	Highlights infrastructure deficits,

		(SEQUIP)	lack of specialized special education personnel, and systemic reliance on rigid summative exams.
TIE (2023)	National curriculum framework, National scope	Lower Secondary Curriculum Reform	Mandates competence-based, inclusive learning outcomes but underscores the need for continuous teacher capacity development.

3.3 Major Thematic Clusters

3.3.1 Cluster 1: Severe Instructional Material and Assistive Resource Deficits

A primary finding across 87% of the reviewed studies was the acute shortage of adapted instructional materials tailored for diverse learning needs. Language learning requires multi-sensory engagement, including visual, auditory, and tactile resources. However, public lower secondary schools across Tanzania suffer from a profound scarcity of assistive technologies, audio-visual language software, tactile learning aids, and leveled reading texts (Kapinga, 2012; World Bank, 2022). In contexts involving visually impaired or low-vision students, Braille textbooks and large-print editions for English and Kiswahili set-books are severely deficient. Consequently, language educators are forced to rely almost exclusively on uniform, teacher-centered chalk-and-talk lecturing, which inherently excludes learners with specialized cognitive or sensory needs.

3.3.2 Cluster 2: Structural Constraints in Large, Multi-Ability Classrooms

Classroom overcrowding emerged as a dominant structural barrier to inclusive language pedagogy. Public and community secondary schools routinely accommodate between 60 and 90+ students per classroom (Lyziyas & Manyanga, 2023). In such environments, managing physical space and student dynamics consumes a significant portion of instructional time. Teachers report that large class sizes make it practically impossible to conduct diagnostic assessments, organize small-group differentiated activities, or provide targeted written and oral feedback. Gifted students lack extension activities, while struggling students become invisible, leading to passive classroom withdrawal.

3.3.3 Cluster 3: Professional Development and Pedagogical Gaps

While pre-service teacher training programs in Tanzanian universities and teacher colleges introduce foundational concepts of educational psychology and special education, empirical evidence indicates a major disconnect between theory and practical classroom application (Ndibalema, 2021; Manyanga, 2023). Teachers report feeling ill-equipped to design differentiated lesson plans, construct flexible assessment rubrics, or scaffold language tasks for neurodiverse learners. Furthermore, continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities are sporadic and predominantly focus on general administrative updates rather than subject-specific adaptive pedagogy.

3.3.4 Cluster 4: Socio-Linguistic Dynamics and Medium of Instruction Friction

The abrupt transition from Kiswahili-medium primary education to English-medium secondary instruction exacerbates learning difficulties for students with diverse language backgrounds (Brock-

Utne, 2007; Mkombozi & Lawa, 2024). Students enter Form I with wide variations in English proficiency, ranging from basic conversational familiarity to severe functional literacy gaps. Language teachers face the dilemma of teaching Form I literature and grammar in English to students who lack basic comprehension skills. When teachers strictly enforce English-only rules, low-proficiency students suffer intense language anxiety and remain silent. Conversely, while code-switching to Kiswahili aids conceptual understanding, it is often discouraged by administrative inspections, creating pedagogical tension for teachers.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 The Disconnect Between Policy and Operational Reality

The findings of this scoping review highlight a significant gap between Tanzania's ambitious inclusive education policy frameworks and the everyday realities of lower secondary language classrooms. While the Education and Training Policy and TIE Curriculum Frameworks promote equity and active, student-centered learning (MoEST, 2018; TIE, 2023), systemic resource shortages and large class sizes preserve rigid, standardized instruction. Differentiated instruction cannot survive in an environment where teachers lack basic adapted learning materials and are overwhelmed by class sizes exceeding 70 students.

4.2 Reconceptualizing Language Pedagogy Through Multi-Modal Design

Addressing learner diversity requires moving away from the assumption of a homogeneous student cohort. Language pedagogy must integrate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (Rose & Meyer, 2002; Tomlinson, 2017). For example, grammar and literary concepts should be presented through visual graphic organizers, audio recordings, and collaborative drama, allowing students with varying learning modalities to engage meaningfully with the subject matter.

4.3 Reforming Assessment Practices

A critical obstacle identified in the literature is the dominance of high-stakes, summative, paper-and-pencil national examinations administered by NECTA. When national assessments strictly evaluate standardized written performance, teachers are naturally disincentivized from spending time on differentiated, formative, or project-based language activities. To support inclusive language instruction, continuous assessment frameworks must be reformed to recognize individual progress and multi-modal expression.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Navigating learner diversity in Tanzanian lower secondary language pedagogy is essential for achieving SDG 4 and ensuring that secondary education empowers all students. However, language teachers currently face severe material, structural, pedagogical, and socio-linguistic constraints. Overcoming these challenges requires moving beyond individual teacher resilience toward comprehensive, institutional interventions that address curriculum design, teacher preparation, material provision, and assessment frameworks.

5.2 Policy and Practical Recommendations

1. Curriculum & Material Adaptation: The Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) should design and di-

tribute specialized Differentiated Language Learning Kits containing audio readers, large-print texts, tactile learning aids, and simplified visual grammar guides for lower secondary schools.

2. Professional Capacity Building: Re-orient pre-service teacher training and institute mandatory, school-based continuous professional development (CPD) modules focused on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated lesson planning, and adaptive language diagnostic testing.
3. Infrastructure & Class Size Management: Accelerate public secondary school infrastructure expansion under SEQUIP to systematically reduce student-teacher ratios to manageable levels (maximum 45 students per class).
4. Assessment Reform: Integrate continuous, multi-modal assessment tasks into national examination scoring structures, reducing exclusive reliance on high-stakes summative written tests.
5. Socio-Linguistic Scaffolding: Formally recognize strategic, multi-lingual scaffolding and translanguaging in Form I language classrooms as legitimate pedagogical tools to ease the transition to English-medium instruction.

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